

15 December 1972

MEMORANDUM FOR: Dr. Henry A. Kissinger  
Assistant to the President for  
National Security Affairs

SUBJECT : Prevalent Misconceptions Bearing on the  
"Vietnamese Sovereignty" Issue -- the  
Reston Transfer

1. As you doubtless know, James Reston of the New York Times has recently published several reprises or variations of the theme that a major obstacle to progress in Vietnam negotiations -- and, hence, a major obstacle to peace via early settlement -- is President Thieu's insistence on having acknowledged sovereignty over every square millimeter of South Vietnamese territory.\* Reston seems to think Thieu is insisting on having his claims to such sovereignty recognized and sanctioned by explicit language in the final settlement agreement (or at least in any settlement agreement that is going to carry his signature). My own knowledge of the details of the current negotiations is far from complete -- and I am certainly not trying to pry -- but from my limited perspective, it looks as if Reston has an important issue very badly distorted.

2. To the best of my limited knowledge, Thieu has never denied that the Communists exercise de facto control over certain portions of South Vietnamese territory. (Thieu's personal representative, Nguyen Phu Duc certainly evinced no outward sign of umbrage or heartburn when we jointly reviewed our control maps in your office on 1 December.) Nor does it seem to me that Thieu can be fairly charged with trying to gain at the conference table control over territory his troops have been unable to win on the battlefield. Thieu's "sovereignty concerns," instead,

\*E.g., Mr. Reston's lead (page 1) story and his Op-Ed column in the 13 December New York Times, his Op-Ed column in the 15 December New York Times and the Times 14 December editorial entitled, "Who's Winning What?"

are focused on a quite different and, in a sense, even more basic issue: the right to legal existence of any non-Communist government in South Vietnam.

3. This "Reston transfer" or distortion is something you might want to consider addressing head on (though perhaps without reference to personalities) in some public forum. It is a piece of mythology that, if not soon scotched, will shortly become received truth, part of what "everybody knows" about the Vietnam situation. This distortion, in turn, plays right into the hands of the North Vietnamese on several counts. It further blackens Thieu in the eyes of the American public and Congress. At least equally important, it provides further intellectual reinforcement for -- and hence adds credibility to -- Hanoi's fundamental argument on how Vietnamese political relationships ought to be perceived.

4. As you well know, Hanoi's basic theme -- rather stridently reaffirmed in Nhan Dan's 13 December editorial entitled "What Do the U.S. Puppets Want?" -- is that "Vietnam is one": What lies below the 17th Parallel is "the southern part of our country," the 17th Parallel is in no sense a political boundary (even temporarily), hence North Vietnamese troops and units, by definition, cannot be "foreign" or "aggressors," etc., etc., etc. For years, Hanoi has buttressed this basic theme with the claim that it is supported by the whole record of Vietnamese history and thus has twenty-odd centuries of precedent behind it. One problem that has long bedeviled President Nixon -- and plagued his predecessors back to the days of President Eisenhower -- is that this Hanoi version of Vietnamese history has gained wide acceptance and become almost an unchallengeable article of faith in American literary, intellectual, academic, press and Congressional circles. Indeed, this vision/version of Vietnamese history has provided the conscious or unconscious intellectual foundation for a great deal of the domestic U.S. opposition to the Indochina policies of the U.S. Government for the past two decades, particularly the increased and often strident opposition of the past seven-odd years.

5. In point of fact, Hanoi's historical argument -- to which Reston and the New York Times editorial board, among others, obviously subscribe -- is palpably specious. The true record of Vietnamese history is much more complex and its major trends run counter to Hanoi's basic thesis much more than they support it.

6. "Viet Nam" -- which is probably an inversion of "Nam Viet" -- literally means "land of the Southern (Nam) Viets." Early Vietnamese history is a murky subject of many scholarly debates that will probably never be resolved, but the general view is that the Viets were a South Chinese tribe that migrated to the Red River delta some time before the Christian era (how much before being one of the more sharply debated controversies). By what we would date as the beginning of the Christian era, or A.D. calendar cycle, the Vietnamese were an identifiably separate ethnic group largely confined to the Red River delta. Their gradual expansion southward along the coastal lowlands, over intervening mountain ridges, and -- eventually -- into the Mekong delta down to its tip at the Camau Peninsula constitutes a leitmotif of recorded Vietnamese history. This process took about eighteen centuries to complete. Serious Vietnamese colonization of the Mekong delta did not begin until the 17th century and the establishment of Vietnamese political suzerainty over most of what we now call "South Vietnam" is an 18th century development.

6. At the beginning of the 17th century, Vietnamese rule extended only to what is now Quang Nam Province in South Vietnam. Technically, all ethnic Viets of that era acknowledged the sovereignty -- or at least the suzerainty -- of a Le dynasty emperor sitting on a throne in what is now called Hanoi. In actual political governance, however, the Vietnamese had split in the late 16th century and by the early 17th they were divided into two primitive polities separated by a line (and a wall) running just north of the 17th Parallel. North of that line, the nominal Le emperor was the puppet of one noble house (the Trinh). South of that line, the house of Nguyen held sway, and though its nobles may have paid token lip service to the existence of the Le "emperor," they had no truck with the writs or edicts of his Trinh patrons. Contemporary European writers and travellers, in fact, almost never (if ever) used the term "Vietnam." Instead they spoke of "Tonking" (the northern Trinh principality) or "Cochin China" (the southern principality of the Nguyens).

7. The ethnic Viet expansion into and colonization of the rest of modern South Vietnam (including the Mekong delta) during the 17th and 18th centuries was, in effect, carried out under the aegis of the southern principality's Nguyen overlords and in no way redounded to the political benefit of the Trinh in the north. During the latter part of the 18th century, both Vietnamese principalities were racked by a series of insurrections and


civil wars in a "time of troubles" generically labelled the Tay Son revolt. The one who eventually emerged victorious from this quarter century of internecine bloodletting was a cadet member of the house of Nguyen and a pretender to the southern throne -- Nguyen Anh -- who was aided by a corps of French and Spanish mercenaries raised by a French priest. He had himself crowned at Hue in 1802 as the Emperor Gia Long. If we discount several months of turbulent chaos after Japan's surrender in 1945, in all the twenty-plus centuries of the Vietnamese peoples' history, the territory modern geographers call "Vietnam" (North and South) has been under a single Vietnamese rule for only 60 years (1802-1862), and during those six decades out of more than twenty centuries, that unified rule was exercised by an Emperor sitting in Hue, not Hanoi.

8. In point of fact, if we are talking about the land modern geographers call "Vietnam," the real record of Vietnamese history provides virtually no sanction for Hanoi's "Vietnam is (politically) one" thesis and a great deal of sanction for Thieu's concept of "one people but (at least temporarily) two nations." The precedent for Hanoi rule over South Vietnam, particularly below MR 1, is similar to but even weaker than the precedent for London rule over America west of the Appalachian/Allegheny ridgeline.

9. Most Vietnamese have a fierce, xenophobic sense of pride in a common cultural heritage or peoplehood. Most educated or politically conscious Vietnamese, North and South, probably have an emotional attachment to some concept of political union. But their concepts of any such abstract notion's acceptability in terms of concrete form or substance will vary markedly. In this sphere, modern Vietnamese native to, respectively, the Red River and Mekong deltas think in terms somewhat similar to those of, say, mid-19th century Prussians and Bavarians. Both of the latter would have thought of themselves as Germans and -- as such -- knit by a common blood and kultur that made them infinitely superior to any Nicht Deutscher. But a Bavarian would hardly have considered himself a traitor to his race simply through wanting no part of rule by those bloody Prussians, even though the latter might have argued stridently to the contrary. (This, incidentally, is not all that far fetched an example, since Ho Chi Minh bore many more affinities to Bismark than he did to George Washington.) Actually, there is a Germanic parallel to the current Vietnamese situation even closer in historical time. The Communist arguments on Vietnam's

political indivisibility are strikingly similar to the arguments advanced by German and Austrian Nazis to justify the 1938 Anschluss.\*

10. In short, the basic assumption underlying Hanoi's juridical/doctrinal position on "sovereignty" -- and underlying much of the sympathetic support extended to Hanoi's claims by members of the American intelligentsia such as Mr. Reston -- does not rest on any unchallengeable historical truth. Quite the reverse. This particular argumentative emperor is not resplendently arrayed in twenty centuries' worth of historical finery. He is, instead, virtually naked.

  
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\*Ironically, just as Hitler was an Austrian by birth, both Le Duan and Pham Van Dong were born in South Vietnam.